MAR 23 1989
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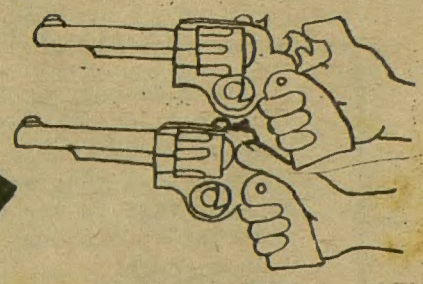

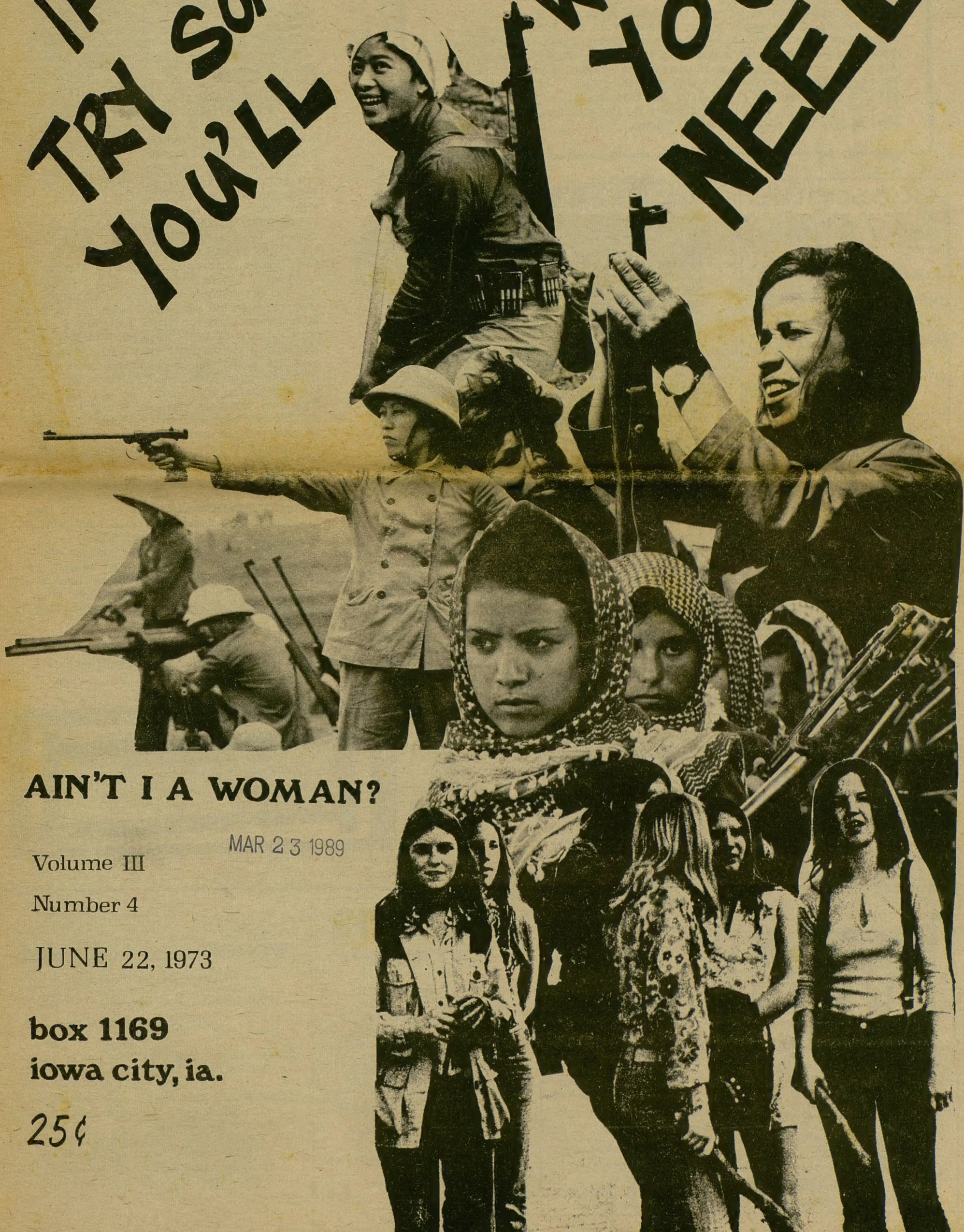

AIN'T I A WOMAN?

MAR 23 1989

Volume III

Number 4

JUNE 22, 1973

box 1169
iowa city, ia.

25¢

from AIAW

Since we put out The Childcare Issue in February we've been through a lot of changes. The situation regarding childcare has changed considerably here and the childcare issue had repercussions in this town that were threatening to people's safety and security. We hope that in the next issue there will be more about childcare and that we can deal with some of the changes this community has been through.

This issue was originally to be one on violence and women. It really isn't. After the childcare issue we were hesitant to put out an issue solely about violence -- afraid of the repercussions it could have for women in this town. We also received Jane Alpert's article and felt that it and the responses to it warranted the space it would take since anyone underground is so limited from normal means of communication.

In between putting out the childcare issue and this issue, we sent copies of a women's poetry anthology to our subscribers. The anthology was published by a group of gay women and includes poems read at the first and second All Women's Poetry Readings in Iowa City. The same group of women have started a women's press. We're excited about both the book and the press. If you didn't get the anthology and would like one they are $1. The next issue of AIAW we expect to print ourselves on the press. So it may take some time but should be out this summer.

April 23, 1973

Dear Sisters,

I really enjoyed your childcare issue... and found it somewhat fascinating that nothing else could get done due to all of the struggles over who's going to take care of the children. I've had fantasies myself of interrupting any and all meetings in my area with mobs of children so that nothing could get done until "who's going to take care of the children" got dealt with a little better. However, I no longer (at this moment) feel quite like that is the best approach for (where I live).

I'm getting off the track.

Here are some of my thoughts

ON CHILDCARE

What do we mean when we say as mothers that we need help with caring for the children? And I tell a two year old who is visiting our house with his mother "no, you can't have that jar full of peanuts" and take out a few to give to him...and his mother rushes from the hall to his defense and she takes over administering what he can and can't have...not able to trust that anybody but she can truly be properly concerned for her child's welfare.

And why is it that when some children are left with other people they totally freak out and cry constantly. I don't think that it is natural for babies to be so attached to their mothers and I feel that we (as mothers) are at least as responsible as other people that children aren't more able to be raised collectively. ..actually I'm not trying to place blame... but too often there is a cry by mothers that nobody else sees what needs to be done in order to care for their baby/child properly...there is a presumption by everyone (including the mother) that mother-knows-best and altho' she's found out everything that she knows about what affects her child (ie why she/he won't eat; why she/he's crying; etc) has been thru trial and error... still other people aren't allowed that same process and instead if mother is around she unconsciously acts as the all-knowing regarding "her" child.

It is hard to fight the privatization of children. But first we are recognizing that they are privatized...and then we are struggling with changing that. I hope that in your future issues you will have more on "who takes care of the children."

I live in a flat with four adults and three children. There are often as many as six neighborhood children. And we have a couple of overnite switching so that who and how many children is always changeing.

love to you
and
power to the
women and children

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If your group wants to receive bundles of AIAW? send 15¢ per copy in advance.

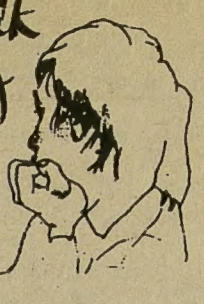
our printing policy....

The AIAW collective makes all decisions on what we print. We try to print articles that we agree with, and as a whole, have the paper represent the politics of the collective. We do, however, decide at times to print material submitted to us that we may have some disagreements with, but that we basically think are helpful and worth reading. We do not edit any articles, but sometimes we don't feel right about printing certain articles without commenting or responding to them in the paper to make our own views clear. If we wish to do that we will communicate privately with whoever submitted the article to be sure it's all right. To designate what articles come from AIAW and what articles come from outside, we have started signing AIAW on collective articles and articles by individuals from the collective.

People keep writing us nice letters and we want to print them. It would save us a lot of time if you would indicate whether or not you want us to print it. We never use anyone's name unless we know she wants us to.

-AIAW

Gay women who need to talk or want info about on-going activities in Iowa City can now talk to gay & by calling GERI at 351-4582



AIAW? is on file...

at the:
International Women's History Archive
2325 Oak St.
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94708

and is available on microfilm through:
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AIN'T I A WOMAN? IS A PUBLICATION REFLECTING ONLY THE OPINION AND STRUGGLE OF A SMALL COLLECTIVE OF RADICAL GAY WOMEN- NOT THE WHOLE GAY/WOMEN'S COMMUNITY IN IOWA CITY.

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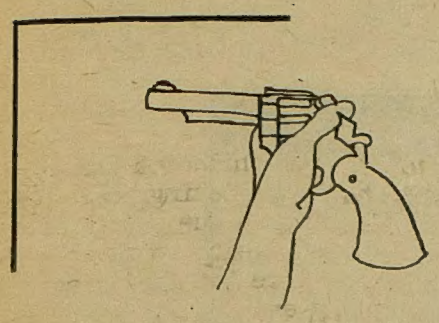
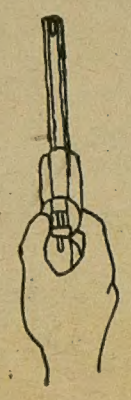


KATHY

Kathy pick up the gun
that you're father used to kill
your mother
It is yours.
It is your inheritance
Take revenge on this putrid
patriarchal world.
Your mother's murder is part of
the world-wide woman genocide.
Your father is one of the every day
murderers.
Seek revenge Kathy
Choose your weapons
And use your anger well.
Become a woman-loving-woman.
Become strong and learn to resist
men
Men are too dangerous to be with
And women are too beautiful to
neglect
Pick up that gun, Kathy
And help us blow their world
to pieces.

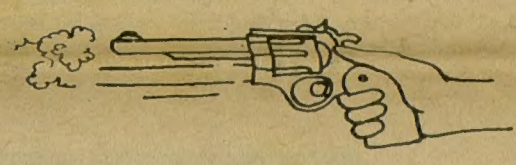
PARANOIA

What I hate most about being
a woman
Is the unavoidable
Almost always present paranoia.
Everyday.
Everyday watching
Keeping my 6th sense of woman's
awareness
Alive and Alert
Walking down the street
Where are all the cars?
Is anyone in them?
What's in that alley
Am I being followed?
What is that noise?
Planning my karate attacks.
If he's tall--kick him in the shins.
And do an elbow punch to his stomach.
If he's short--go for his eyes.
If he comes up behind me smash his instep.
I hate it
I hate it
I hate the need to always be conscious of
my survival.
In my house.
lock the doors.
Don't take a bath when no one else is home.
I try to ignore the cats which sound like
murders, rapists, intruders.
Watching kids--doubles, triples,
multiplies by thousands
The caution
The fear.
The need to protect.
What if something happened to one of them?
Can I really defend them and me?
I don't know
I really don't know.
This constant fear.
I used to walk own the streets of
Newark and NYC
Alone
Leading a quacking toy duck on a string
behind me
Pretending I was crazy
So maybe no one would bother me.



And no one did.
Pure luck.
My fear of men is so deep rooted.
So real.
Hundreds of men everyday pass through the
cafeteria line.
And I think any one of these men
Could be a murderer
The murderer of the student nurse who was
killed in her dorm room over spring
break
Almost everyone of these men
Is a personal threat to my life
They hate women
want us destroyed.
They are so helpless and stupid.
"How do you get coffee"
"Can I give you 3¢"
"How does the creamer work"
"I have the change"--and I know he hardly
ever does.
They spill things all the time.
And they take their inability to function
in this world
As a natural expected phenomena.
They turn their inferiority into hatred.
Brute obnoxiousness.
Slamming the money down.
Throwing it all over
When I told one of the men, half-smiling,
he was a little slow in always having
his money ready
He replied
"Oh, it's so nice you're so maternal."
Everything of theirs is a distortion!
I fear their stupidity.
Their hatred
Their envy of women.
Their physical strength.
I need a lesbian nation.
As a reality
Not as a toy in my head.
Paranoia is one of the great contributors
To women being half people.
And I know that any women's paranoia is
real.
I would like to get a gun.

– Rowboat



"The Enormous Contradiction We Have Sold Ourselves"

The murder and suicide of Pat Cone and her ex-husband, respectively, in Lone Tree last week is too "close to home" both literally (because she worked and had friends here in Iowa City) and symbolically (because every woman has seen and/or felt violence done by a man or men to her or a woman close to her) for us to just let it go by.

It's time we saw the repeated fatal beatings, stranglings, shootings of women by men close to them (we hear/see it on the radio, t.v., and newspapers everyday) not as isolated incidents or peculiar private crimes but as the product of the values our society cherishes and promotes.

Males are socialized to equate violence towards others, especially females, as a sign of affection. Females are socialized to disarm their natural, self-protective instincts and to accept that "VIOLENCE=LOVE" double-think as truth. For males in our culture, violence serves two purposes: (1) as a defense and outlet for hostility and (2), as a love message, a way of communicating affection (or deep caring). "I can't live without you," so popular in our songs and romantic myths translates easily into: "so I'll die unless I can have you." Similarly, "I don't want you to live without me" becomes "I'll kill you if you leave me."

In school and families around the time of puberty, girls are taught to double-think when violence is done them by boys, to not react naturally and fight back, but rather to interpret a boy's hitting them as "he loves me!" This brainwashing is an important factor in preventing a woman from taking action to stop a man's hurting her. Similarly, it works as an effective stop to anyone else's interfering when a man is seen--say, on the street--hitting a woman. Onlookers assume that because it is or may by a lover's quarrel, it's "their business" only.

Even the laws enforce that kind of mentality. In most states there has been legal support of men's violent crimes against wives or female lovers. Men's crimes in these cases usually take a lesser penalty--manslaughter, for example, in the event of the woman's death; whereas women's slaying their husbands or male lovers often is seen as murder in the first degree. In some states, even with the same charge, a woman has gotten a stiffer sentence for her "family crime".

The enormous contradiction we have sold ourselves--that someone is beating someone else because he loves her--puts women who relate to violent male lovers(this is, sooner or later, most men in our society) in the hideous double-bind of always hoping for affection from the person who physically abuses her. How can she prevent her own harm? He might be nice tonight when he comes home, so, she reasons, she shouldn't leave or call on friends or the police to deter him from hurting her. Anticipating his violence might bring it down on her, she fears. 'And, anyway, he may beat me a little when he's upset but he's never seriously hurt me.

Violence is violence. We should not see "slapping her around a little" as different in kind (only in degree) from the violence that ends in fatal beatings, stranglings, knifings, shootings. Everything begins little. Extreme violence is not exceptional; it is the natural escalation of small violent acts.

The number and frequency of beatings and other violent crimes as a cause of women's deaths in this society are so common as to be ignored as an unchangeable part of "the way things are".

But nothing is unchangeable. We urge all women to get together with other women you know to talk about your own experiences with male violence upon females. (yourselves or women close to you). Sharing that grief and anger will help us understand what we live/have lived under, and will help us decide how to put an end to that oppression.

The story of Goldflower is well-know in China. A woman badly abused by her husband, Goldflower, gained support in "speak bitterness" meetings with other wives in her town. As a group, they warned Goldflower's husband that violence has no place in his treatment of his wife. Still he beat her. Then the women of the town went together to his house and beat him. Convinced, he changed his behavior; so did other men in the town.

Violence is no kin to loving. We must not lie to ourselves about that anymore. We must teach our children the truth, too. We must enforce our demand that violence against women stop. To do that we must begin where we are, now.

Castrating bitches

Dedicated to Sarah Ottens

Our goal is to regain control of our own bodies and lives. Yet, I am always amused and often greatly irritated to hear claims that the women's movement seeks to emascultate men. I should like to point out the irony of it. Women's bodies have been subjected to men's imaginations and manipulations for centuries.

There were the pre-revolutionary Chinese who broke their women's feet and socialized them into believing they were more beautiful that way when in reality they had fixed it so that their women could never run away from their slave positions.

There were Moslem men who buried their women under veils and robes in the sweltering desert sun in order to inhibit their own sexual desires.

There were the American bluecoats who sliced the genitals of Indian men and women, wearing the women's genitals on their hats for sport.

There were the tortures of chastity belts, those iron girdles which not only prevented a woman's freedom of choice, but which were unbearable, cold contraptions which collected filth and disease. Women were left at home burning with disease while their christian soldiers were raping Moslem women or lying dead on battlefields, the chastity belts' keys gone forever.

Freud managed to further louse things up for women by subjecting their psyches to his male interpretations of female sexuality. Post-Freudian doctors operated on women, removing their clitorises so they would experience the vaginal orgasms that Freud thought to be more mature than the "immature" clitoral orgasms.

There were women who, because of church doctrine were burned as witches, who died or suffered from forced motherhood or in the hands of illegal abortionists because the patriarchal church banned birth control and abortion. All these, not to mention countless women past and present in all societies who have been subjected by men to beatings, rape, murder and prostitution.

Certainly when I think of all these inhuman, premeditated cruelties that women's bodies have endured due to whims of their menfolk, I must laugh in rage against some man's fear of being emasculated. When I dream of the inner rage of women collectively coming together for a purpose, and think: "Castration?"...It would be too kind.

The demystified Fortress

Then,
I stole your armor,
Your iron suit, lance,
Face guards, epaulets,
And put them in the Museum
Under the Tower
Where I secretly practiced
Wearing them.

I even perfected
Your signature
On my death warrant,
Daddy,
All of you aromatic,
Robins-egg blue.

Then I sat in the glass Tower
Wondering if you could see me
without my iron vest
Or red wig; like Queen Bess
Imagined letting your severed head
Bleed over my velvet robe.

--Barbara Unger

Due to a pregnancy I was married at 19. My groom was 22. Mentally and emotionally we were both children. During the first two years of my marriage I was slapped and knocked around quite often. Usually it happened when I could no longer keep my mouth shut and became "bitchy" about the fact that I was always home alone while he was out drinking or playing poker or with his girlfriend. Once he hit me while I was attempting to learn how to drive "because I was so stupid." The encounter that I remember most vividly occurred the night I brought my child home from the hospital. It had never occurred to me to ask his permission to breast feed my baby. It seems he had some fucked up hang up about nursing. He claimed that he didn't want anyone sucking on my tits but him. I was completely intimidated and changed imediately to the bottle method. I never even considered nursing my second child. I had a black eye for two weeks that I received after a party for yelling at him in front of his friends about having an affair.

For a long time I never said anything to anyone except my closest friend. Everyone who knew him thought him a gentle and kind person. During this time I never fought back. I just cowered and cried. I think I felt that the shame he later felt each time, was my strongest weapon. At some point I couldn't stand it any longer and started to hit back. That may have happened twice before the violence ceased for good. I told him if he ever touched me again I would leave him. It took me four more years to get my shit together to do that but it wasn't due to violence. Once during that time I confessed all this to some women who were also married. They all admitted similar experiences that they had never discussed before.

Why this is not talked about, I'm not sure. I imagine most women are trying to protect their husband, their marriages, mostly it is a real loss of face in suburban circles to admit that you are unhappy. I was never actually beat up, just knocked around. Some women are not so lucky and still nobody is talking. The taboo against admitting all this is so great that even now I find it incredibly difficult to write this article.

It's really bad but I kind of have an attitude that goes along the lines of straight women who are assaulted by their boyfriends and still continue to relate to them are stupid and there doesn't seem to be much I can do about it. I mean if they continue to allow themselves to be fucked over (and I see being fucked over as a form of violence) and especially hit, then I can't see a road open for me to even begin to bring them down. I don't know how to tell someone to take that first step. I see that as essential to dealing with women and violence. Women are going to have to retaliate and I know if I'm putting my life on that kind of line, it's not going to be for someone who will go and do the same thing over again. I want revenge and I deserve it but the revenge I seek is (1) personal against men that fuck lesbians over (2) political i.e. maybe it will give women courage to do something about the violence they themselves are subjected to. I want men everywhere to be afraid of women in the same manner women are afraid of men. Men are not going to take this fear on voluntarily, they are going to have to be subjected to women's rage and not to one woman's rage but to women as a whole. I want the guy that I pass on a dark street late at night to be as afraid of me as I am of him. I want to wake up in the morning and hear on the news that a man was found castrated in an alley everytime I hear that a woman has been raped. I am paranoid and scared shitless of men because I know their violence that is directed toward women comes from a basic premise that women are lesser persons than they are and will not be able to harrass them as much as a man (an equal) can so it's no sweat - no sweat to bat them around a bit. Well, they have got to learn that we are persons, we tried the education, dissertation, kissing ass, methods and women are still getting abused constantly so everyday it becomes more and more apparent that direct physical assault is the only answer.

MOTHER RIGHT: a new feminist theory

by jane alpert

Jane Alpert has been underground since 1970, just before her trial for conspiracy to bomb various buildings in New York city.

PART I: An Open Letter to the Weatherwomen

Dear Sisters in the Weather Underground:

I am addressing this piece to you, in spite of the fact that my concern at this point is with a far broader spectrum of women than your tiny band of forgotten leftists, because it was our arguments of the past year that convinced me to publicize my conversion from the left to radical feminism. I realized after these arguments that for me to keep silence would only support the illusion that the "underground" is united around the male politics which you still espouse, and these politics and practices are too reprehensible to me as a feminist to protect them by silence. I know that seeing this letter - which you thought you would receive as a private communication - here in print will shock you and that you will regard much of its contents as a breach of the tacit code of honor among political fugitives. Nevertheless, my own politics demand that I share with all women my knowledge of the sexual oppression of the left, if only to warn other sisters against the pain that has been inflicted on us. Perhaps you personally will never open up to feminism; yet the experiences I am going to relate may speak more effectively to women involved in other branches of the left, from McGovern organizers to Socialist Workers Party members. And I have some hope that the impact of a public statement may do what none of my private arguments have succeeded in doing: persuade you to leave the dying left in which you are floundering and begin to put your immense courage and unique skills to work for women - for yourselves

Since this is an open letter, let me summarize for other women what you already know of my history underground and as a feminist. I became a fugitive in May 1970, a few days before my scheduled sentencing for conspiracy to bomb military and war-related corporate buildings in Manhattan. I was never part of SDS or of Weatherman, and although I'd had conversations with Weatherpeople which were influential in my decision to go underground rather than to prison, I lost contact with the organization shortly after I became a fugitive. I was a serious militant leftist at that time, and the most feminist activity I'd ever been involved with was the all-women's newspaper Rat, which, dispite its exclusion of men, remained thoroughly left-identified. In the last three years I have become a radical feminist. The change in my politics has not been sudden, and I want to go into its causes and its substance much more fully later in this paper. For now, I only want to set the scene of my renewed acquaintance with the Weather Underground by saying that when it occurred I was decisively through with the left and had, at least mentally, rededicated myself to the cause of a revolution made by and for women.

It was in this general frame of mind then, just about a year ago, that I was attending a public lecture and, a few minutes after seating myself, noticed a man sitting nearby who looked vaguely familiar. I would not have noticed him at all except for the fact that he was very obviously staring at me and at the same time making laughing, surprised comments to the people around him. I thought with some alarm that he must be either an agent or a dangerous fool, and I was both more and less apprehensive when I finally realized who he was.

It was Mark Rudd.

After I recovered from the shock, I became excited by this rare and unhoped-for opportunity to share experiences with a fellow-fugitive and for a short time I relished it in spite of the problems. Rudd was living with a woman I hadn't met before, whom I'll call Caroline. She seemed to be a strong and sensitive person and I would have loved to get to know her well, independently of Rudd himself. This was not possible because Rudd made it difficult for us to see each other without him, and because when the three of us were together he made a practice of interrupting her and seemed to regard himself as the spokesman for them both. Nevertheless, his obvious dependence on her combined with his frequent apologies to me for his manipulative behavior in past years (toward me in particular and women in general) gave me some hope that he had fundamentally changed and might even have become a sympathetic ally to the Women's Movement. I was soon disillusioned.

What finally woke me to the reality of this man's character was a conversation we had while Caroline was out of town. He made a special point of wanting to get together with me at this time and, as we were sitting on the front seat of a car on a rainy evening, he attempted to put our relationship on a more intimate footing by means of the following confession. He told me that approximately a year earlier Caroline had had a serious ovarian infection which made sex very painful for her. This, he said, was the root of a whole range of "problems" in their relationship, ranging from his virtually raping her (he couldn't help himself, he said) to his imagining himself in love with another woman. He described to me how titillating he found it that this other woman looked on him as a revolutionary hero, how she excited him sexually without satisfying him intellectually, how he couldn't resist the excitement of an affair with her though it was causing great anguish to Caroline. The affair ended, however, when he learned that the "other" woman was pregnant by him and that she wanted to have his child. He regarded the pregnancy as entirely her own fault, since she had stopped taking birth-control pills without telling him, and he explained that this wilful and self-destructive carelessness - as he saw it - was what had proved to him that "a man can't politically educate a woman." It slowly dawned on me that Rudd was telling me this story (1) because it proved what an irresistibly highly-sexed masculine creature he was, and (2) because as a "liberated woman," not to mention a presumably pro-abortion feminist, he quite sincerely expected me to cluck a sympathetic tongue over his problems with this Dumb Chick.

I told Rudd in the strongest terms of which I was capable how appalling his behavior was to me, but though my failure to sympathize seemed to startle him, nothing I could say would convince him of the seriousness with which I regarded his crimes. "Of course I trust you," were his benevolently paternalistic last words to me. "I know you wouldn't do something like those Boston women who denounced Eric Mann (a Weatherman who served a two-year prison term) as a sexist pig who deserved his imprisonment."

While it wasn't possible for me to establish much of a relationship with Caroline given the short time we were in the same geological area and Rudd's obtuse omnipresence, I could at least look forward to getting in touch, through Rudd, with women in the Weather Underground. I was wary about this because I knew you Weatherwomen had never given a sign, publicly or privately, of being more receptive to a feminist point of view than Rudd himself was; that you had never risked the esteem of leftist men in any statement or action; and that the few statements of your organization which made reference to the Women's Movement revealed a complete failure to understand it and an intense eagerness to co-opt it. Nevertheless, I respected - and respect - you in a way I never could Rudd. I knew it was your strength that had held the organization together when the men's desperate egomania threatened to destroy you all. I could count on the fact that as women - and specifically as women fugitives - we shared certain experiences that could bring us closer together in outlook and feelings than would be possible with even the most sympathetic and sensitive man. Finally, whatever the risk, it seemed well worth it if I could give even one woman in our situation support that would help her stand up for herself, and for all women, against our oppression in a movement that puts our interests last. Encouragingly, my very first meeting with one of you was a wonderful experience for me, and I was much moved by the warm reception and attention this woman gave me and my politics, and the genuine respect that I felt from her as well as for her. (I suspect now, in the aftermath of other meetings, that this may have been partly because she was unprepared for the radical changes in my politics and therefore responded to me openly and honestly. The rest of you had, in advance of meeting me, already armored yourselves against revealing too much of your "personal problems" as women in a male organization.) For whatever reason, I was, as it turned out, all too ready to plunge into a dialogue in which I used my own skin as wallpaper while you sidestepped and evaded every issue.

Your resistance to discussing your personal experience, your trivializing of your own pain and suffering, your insistence that the oppression of others is more important than your own - these are part of the self-contempt that has been bred in all of us women, and I understand it as I understand myself. I can even deal with your more contrived evasions, the ones that were obviously developed only after years of building defenses against the threat that the Women's Movement seems to you. I can see why you overlooked security so that, apparently by chance, I ran into one more Weatherwoman than we had agreed I would meet during the brief time we were together, a woman who just "happened to be" rabidly anti-feminist. I know what advantage you saw in circulating a vicious, unfounded rumor about a well-known feminist and then asserting she herself was not to blame for her errors because the Women's Movement was responsible for her psychological destruction. I can understand too well the reasons for your flippant claim that it "bores" you to talk about men, a pathetic way to avoid admitting your oppression.

But the wall I cannot surmount is your insistence that if I really practiced sisterhood I wouldn't make demands on you in the name of feminism, but would respect your political path as equally valid to my own. You want me to accept your claim that you are no longer dominated by men, as you admit you were when you first joined Weatherman, as in fact we all are as long as we live under patriarchy. Yet in the same breath that you claim, "Women run the organization," you admit that of the five members of the Weatherman Central Committee, three are men. And you have no shame in telling me that one of these three is Bill Ayers, notorious for his callous treatment and abandonment of Diana Oughton before her death and for his generally fickle and high-handed treatment of women; and that another is Jeff Jones, who once told that dull-witted misogynist Robert Palmer that if I thought Weatherman was a male supremicist organization, I could "suck his dick." Or have Ayers and Jones now become feminists too - like Mark Rudd, who, after a year's leave to overcome his "arrogance and insensitivity" (which you won't even call by its true name: sexism) you are admitting back into the organization?

The politico-feminist split is a real one, one that will vanish as soon as we accept ourselves as women first of all, but which will continue to divide us until we share that consciousness. It is you leftists, you male-identified socialist and liberal and pacifist and Weather-sympathizing women, who try to deny any significant difference between male politics and feminist politics. "We're all just women," you say, and we are - but to you this is a phenomenon of the most peripheral possible interest, indeed it only seems to occur to you when under fire from feminists. As long as you are working politically with men, as long as you are letting men define your attitudes, behavior and standards, then we stand on opposite sides of a line all too visible to me in spite of your blindness to it, but which I know you too will see once you have crossed it. And to cross it you need do only one thing: let your own self-interest be your highest priority. I am not asking you to stop loving men, or to break all personal and emotional ties with the men who are important to you. I know that those ties are

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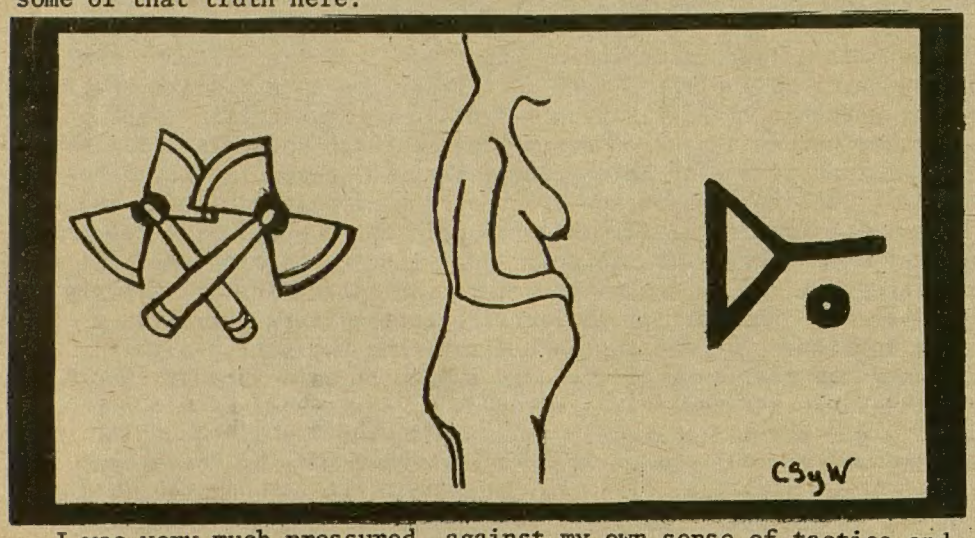
never broken out of a simplistic political decision but only when and if consciousness of opression makes them so inconsistent with self-respect that they can no longer be borne. Even then it is with enormous pain and grief and in spite of an ever-reluctant part of ourselves that we separate from men we have cared for. I firmly believe that one can be a serious feminist and still live with and relate to a man and to men. The gulf that is between us is not that, but rather that you allow men to rule on your politics.

Believe me, I understand your side of it. I've been on that side - I've practically drowned on that side. Over a year ago I wrote an introduction to a book of the prison letters of Sam Melville, a man I loved and lived with who was killed in the Attica uprising of September 1971. I was already a feminist when I wrote that introduction and had theoretically rejected the politics that Melville had taught me and that he had lived and died for. Yet I had never found the courage or the words to tell him that while he lived, and especially while influenced by the powerful feelings that his murder aroused in me, I was incapable of writing the truth of his male supremacy - that underside of men's lives that only women know - in my eulogistic essay on his life. Since this is the last time I will ever write about him, I would like to tell some of that truth here.



I was very much pressured, against my own sense of tactics and timing, into playing the role I did in the group of radical bombers Melville half-led, half-dragged along with him. The pressure was of the kind peculiar and common to male-female relationships: he constantly threatened to leave me if I backed out. What he valued in me, besides having a dependable sexual partner and housekeeper, was what he took to be my "independence" and "self-sufficiency" - as he often told me. This made me useful to him as an ally, and further assured him that I had the quality he prized above all others in women: the capacity to love him devotedly, yet get along without him uncomplainingly whenever he chose to leave. The last letter I received from him exhorted me against writing narrow-mindedly of loving and needing him, instead of writing about great social truths (the ones he was concerned with, that is). "To speak of love, especially love between one desperate man and woman, limits our vision and ties us to the past." Yet the same letter ends on an explicitly sexual note: "Yes, sweet bitch, I love you. And if they ever let me out and the wind is right, I'll find you." This was typical; he would never "degrade" himself by admitting love for a woman in any fashion not immediately tied to his sexual pleasure.

A few months before we were arrested, Sam began a secret affair with a woman friend of ours whom I hadn't seen in some time. In order to keep us from comparing notes on his behavior, he told her he was no longer living with me. He also at least hinted to her that the sabotage of military and corporate buildings around the city was the work of himself and friends. I descovered his betrayal only by the coincidence of having acquaintances in common with the other woman, acquaintances to whom she had repeated Sam's hints. To this day I don't know how many other dangerous, possibly fatal, violations of security his masculinist need to boast led him to commit.

Some will say Melville's sexism was extreme just as his politics were extreme. Yet I have seen his behavior duplicated in the most bourgeois households by males of all political persuasions, economic backgrounds, ages and skin colors. I never knew Sam to cook a meal for himself; he once wrote WASH ME in black magic marker on the side of the refrigerator as a cute reminder of my responsibilities; he threatened to leave me, and meant it, if I took up smoking cigarettes after having given them up to please him; he wouldn't allow our lease, our telephone, our utilities bill, our bank account or anything else we shared to be in his name on the ostensible grounds that he was delinquent with his income tax and didn't want to be found through public records. The real reason, it turned out, was that he didn't want his wife to find him and demand the child support he owed her and hadn't paid in years.

He was sexually impotent unless he could fantasize the woman he was with as a prostitute and she went along with his fantasy.

At one point Sam joined a political group headed by Rap Brown. This group's attitude toward women was bigotry itself: they didn't include any and they didn't intend to. According to Brown himself, as quoted by Melville, women would be "a distraction from serious business." When I confronted Sam on this, he seemed slightly embarrassed but wouldn't even commit himself to discussing male supremacy with his new idol, Rap Brown. Recalling this, I'm reminded ironically of the division of all-Black bomber pilots stationed out of Texas during World War II who, despite phenomenal sacrifices and heroism were forbidden the supposed privelege of being integrated with White batallions. How strange it is that not only the man I lived with but one of the most brilliant and sophistocated Black militants of the 1960's should turn out to have the same kind of crass ignorance about women.

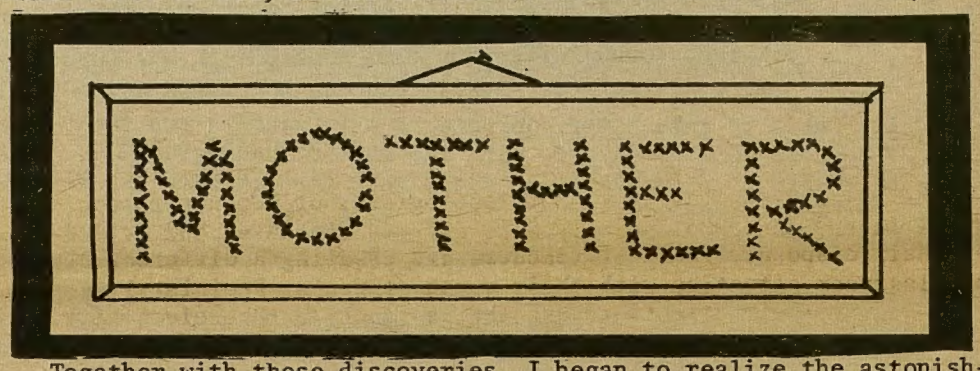
And so, my sisters in Weatherman, you fast and organize and demonstrate for Attica. Don't send me news clippings about it, don't tell me how much those deaths moved you.

I will mourn the loss of 42 male supremicists no longer.

Part II: The Education of a Feminist At-Large

My first year underground was very hard. Expecting to die for the Revolution in a matter of months, I was unprepared to find myself not only alive but living a rather unadventurous and secluded existence less than a year after "disappearing." I found it increasingly difficult to get along with the friends with whom I was still in touch, especially with the men who were becoming increasingly overbearing and critical of my actions, as I was growing increasingly sensitive to their interference. Chafing at every restriction, hostile even to the one woman friend I really cared for, I finally decided to take off on my own, reasoning that it couldn't get much worse. I started to travel and for a few months just roamed, almost aimlessly, from one community to another across the country.

As I traveled, I slowly became aware that nothing was less relevant to the lives of most people in this country than the white left, with which I still identified myself. The leftist (and rightist, for that matter) distinctions between working class and ruling class, hippies and straight people, youth and Establishment, all seemed increasingly absurd to me. They seemed to determine nothing of certainty about anyone's attitude or political outlook. As I moved around I could see more clearly than ever the oppression of Black, Chicano, Puerto Rican and Indian peoples. Yet at the same time I was learning concretely that women existed in well-defined subcultures within each White and Third World community. Finally all my experiences kept reminding me of one fact of my own identity I was continually trying to forget: that I was a woman. Men, Third World and otherwise, young and old, hippie and straight, related to me as Woman, all my other interests or characteristics being, in their eyes, mere modifications of that one essential. Whether I was desired, rejected, abused, admired, ignored, treated with kindness or hostility, it was basically because I was a female doing whatever it was I was doing. Women generally took their cue of how to relate to me from the way men related to me, or I to men. It occurred to me that this was no different from the way people I had known for years had related to me but because we had known each other well I had been aware of the subtleties in our relationships to the point of being blind to the underlying structure. Of course I had heard feminists express these perceptions before, and had even asserted them myself occasionally, but I had never internalized them. I now began to think that if my politics were to be based on my own situation and not on someone else's perception of reality, I would have to deal with the fact that the rest of the world thought of me as a woman first of all, before it even listened to what I had to say.



Together with these discoveries, I began to realize the astonishing impact the Women's Movement has had over the U.S. in just a few years. I could see women everywhere, White, Black, Brown, Indian, responding in their daily lives to the fact that some woman somewhere had said, "Men oppress us." I came to know Chicana women living in a barrio who were organizing women's health care programs and women's antirape squadrons to patrol their own neighborhood. A White woman, mother of three, from a poor Southern family and on welfare, talked to me with great eloquence about how she saw the courts, the police, the welfare system and her ex-husband as all part of the same male-run system, which women needed to take over and run for their own benefit. A woman I met who had been born into a wealthy and traditional Japanese family told me she was filing for divorce against a husband who physically and mentally abused her because she refused to go through life suffering from the same causes her mother and grandmother had before her. These women - all random examples - would not necessarily say or think that they were part of the Women's Movement. But they demonstrated to me, among others, that the changing consciousness represented by the Women's Movement has been more far-reaching than any public-opinion poll on Women's Liberation would seem to show. As for the frequently heard opinion that Third World women support Third World liberation but not Women's Liberation, I believe that this is true chiefly of a few women who are highly regarded by Third World male radicals and hence are considered newsworthy by the media. Among the majority of Third World women, it seems to me that the Women's Movement is spreading and its ideas are having increasing effect, just as among White women.

The turning point of my personal rapprochement with feminism came when, a year after I'd left New York as a fugitive, I joined a women's rap group composed of a half-dozen other women, of widely different economic backgrounds, ages and family situations, brought together only by our common desire - or desperate need - to talk with other women about our lives. No one in the group knew who I was, or that I was wanted on a federal warrant. I know, though, that they all sensed my unspoken inner turmoil (if not the specific causes of it) and in response gave me more positive emotional and intellectual support than I could have imagined possible from a group of strangers. They sustained me through the crisis I underwent after Melville's murder and the dramatic upheavals in my consciousness involved in that experience. Eventually, when a series of circumstances forced me to leave the area in which I'd come to know them, they gave me, as a group, the help and strength I needed to face yet another move into the unknown.

The process of the consciousness-raising group, for me and for the other women involved, was one in which we began to be able to define ourselves as individuals and as women. Some of us had previously conceived of ourselves as exceptional women, some of us thought being female necessarily meant being passive and dependent,

Responses to Jane Alpert by five Iowa City Dykes follow this article.

but it soon became clear that we had come to the group each in a private panic of no longer knowing who we were. What we discovered in each other was the pulse of a culture and a consciousness which was common to us as women. We discovered it as something that had always been there, but that we had not previously recognized or felt able to trust. Trusting it - or gaining confidence in our thoughts, feelings, resentments, desires and intuitions as attributes that we shared as a people and which were therefore valid - became the basis of beginning to trust ourselves as individuals.

I believe that the struggle to define oneself for oneself ultimately takes place in a realm of the mind in which one is always alone and unsupported. For some women the existence of a women's group or even a Women's Movement has not been a necessary precondition of that struggle. Individual women of genius - artists, scientists, philosophers, activists and visionaries - have left us written and other evidence to prove that throughout the history of patriarchy some women have found it possible to call upon their inner powers to create and achieve and succeed. For each of these women, many others who were unable to leave us records have managed to define their individuality and assert themselves in the face of enormous male hostility. And yet the evidence we have proves ultimately only that no matter how many obstacles are in the way, a few women will possess the ability, determination and special privelege to overcome them. In considering social change it is of much more significance that today's Women's Movement has encouraged thousands of women who would never have done so before to discover and develop their unique talents, and to stand up against male prerogatives and values with originality and courage. Moreover, as increasing numbers of women are turning to art, science and other creative efforts, a truly female - that is, a feminist - culture is beginning to take shape. It seems little short of miraculous that with so little in the way of facilities - still very few research grants, little access to the best laboratories, to substantial publishing contracts and the like, our own culture has nevertheless managed to take root and flourish. Feminist newspapers, literary magazines, cooperative childcare centers, anthropology collectives, legal clinics, poetry workshops, self-help medical clinics, counseling services, music groups and graphics collectives are a few of the new-born alternative institutions providing the access for women whose values and vision are unacceptable to the patriarchy, or who choose not to pay the artistic and emotional price exacted by men in exchange for a share of male privelege. Even more significantly, the products of these alternative institutions (and of the individual women involved with them or working on their own) is qualitiatively different from the products of men and male institutions. For instance, a feminist all-women's rock band sounds different from a male rock band or from an all-women's rock band trying to reproduce male music; they are not only singing different lyrics but the melodies and harmonies and rhythms are different. Feminist anthropologists are approaching their subject from a different perspective and with different assumptions than male anthropologists, or women anthropologists in the past who had only male-defined standards and methods at their disposal. Feminist teachers are creating a different style of classroom situation with their women students. Feminist lawyers are helping their clients to use the law to help themselves. All of us are not engaged in such activities but many of us share in the changing consciousness that these women are expressing publicly. And in light of the accomplishments already generated from this changing consciousness, I think we need to take another look not only at the old male-supremacist assumptions about women's "nature" but also at some of the assertions of the Women's Movement so far. Just what is the powerful source of this consciousness?

For centuries feminists have asserted that the essential difference between women and men does not lie in biology but rather in the roles that patriarchal societies (men) have required each sex to play. The motivation for this assertion is obvious: women's biology has always been used to justify women's oppression. As patriarchal reasoning went, since "God" or "nature" or "evolution" had made woman the bearer and nurser of the species, it logically followed that she should stay home with the children and perform as a matter of more-or-less ordained duty all the domestic chores involved in keeping and feeding a household. When women work outside the home we have the most menial and lowest-paid tasks to perform, chiefly because any labor a woman performs outside the home is thought to be temporary and inessential to her, no matter how she herself might be inclined to regard it. Naturally then, the first healthy impulse of feminism is to deny that simply because women have breasts or uteruses we are better suited to wash dishes, scrub floors or change diapers. As newly-roused feminists, we retorted to evidence that women might be intrinsically better suited to perform some roles than others by pointing out that men have been forcing these roles on us for at least five thousand years. After such time conditioning and habit are so strong that they appear to be intrinsic and innate.

However, a flaw in this feminist argument has persisted: it contradicts our felt experience of the biological difference between the sexes as one of immense significance. To begin with, it seems obvious that biology alone would, in primitive societies, have dictated different roles and different powers as appropriate to each sex. And biological scientists have indeed assumed, for the most part, that the physical passivity of the female mammal during intercourse and the demands of pregnancy, childbirth and nursing clearly indicate the role of women as biologically determined, and inferior. In response to this, Shulamith Firestone, with the publication of The Dialectic of Sex in 1970, articulated the definitive feminist antithesis to this idea by denouncing biology as reactionary. Agreeing that biology had necessarily been an all-powerful determinant of social roles in the past, Firestone went on to argue that the advances of technology made this tyranny potentially obsolete. Women are still enslaved to their bodies not because of biology but because the patriarchy will not permit the use of technology to interfere with men's power over women. However, in Firestone's view, the dialectic of history, in which the sexual relationship underlies all other power relationships, indicates that a feminist revolution is inevitable. This revolution will put technology to work to literally free women from biology - from pregnancy, childbirth and the rest - thereby eliminating the last difference of any importance between the sexes and ultimately causing the sexual difference itself to wither away, in the course of evolution, together with all forms of oppression.

I think that Firestone is visionary in perceiving the sexual relationship as the basis of all power relationships, and in predicting that feminist revoltuion will therefore result in the end of all oppression. However, the evidence of feminist culture, which has accumulated largely since the publication of her epochal book, suggests that her analysis of the role of biology was deficient and that a third possibility - which is indeed a new synthesis of the previous views - may well be correct. The unique consciousness or sensibility of women, the particular attributes that set feminist art apart, and a compelling line of research now being persued by feminist anthropologists all point to the idea that female biology is the basis of women's powers. Biology is hence the source and not the enemy of feminist revolution.

The root of this idea lies perhaps in buried history. It has increasingly been acknowledged that the most ancient societies worshiped a female deity or deities, and that menstruation, conception, pregnancy, childbirth and all other phenomena associated with female biology were surrounded with taboos. Furthermore, a number of these ancient societies were matrilineal: property and social identity were inherited through the mother rather than the father. Whether women had any secular power in these societies is a subject of dispute, and most archaeologiests and anthropologists have felt that women didn't have any power except over a few religious rites. But most archaeologists and anthropologists have been men, whose imaginations could not quite grasp a society in which women held real power, even a pretechnological society. (For example, the section on "Amazons" in the authoritative Oxford Classical Dictionary spends all of one sentence dismissing the notion that the Amazon tribes ever existed - though these tribes were acknowledged by nearly every ancient historian who wrote about preclassical times.) Feminists in many branches of science and historical research have been re-examining the evidence for the existence of ancient gynocracies, or women-ruled societies. Among the more visionary and lyrically persuasive (if somewhat factually problematic) of these recent studies is The First Sex by Elizabeth Gould Davis. Davis hypothesizes that patriarchal society began only after barbarian male tribes violently overthrew the ancient, peaceful and relatively advanced gynocracies, in which women were not only worshiped but were actually temporal rulers. These ancient gynocracies may have existed throughout Asia, northern Africa, the Arabian peninsula and the Mediterranean area and persisted as late as 2,000 B.C. in some areas, such as Crete. Recent archaeological evidence suggests that Davis may be proven correct in the near future, and her thesis has been stated in a more tentative style than hers by several other highly respected scientists.

The feminist conception of these societies is that there was no such sharp division as now exists between home life and societal life. Industry was carried out in the home, travel was limited and the life of the society centered around the life in the home, in which women were the decision-makers. Therefore women held power not only in the home but also in the tribe or clan at large. They decided not only family matters, but when to plant and harvest, when to go to war and make peace, questions of marriage and property and all important disputes within the clan. Religion was so intrinsic a part of daily life that it was impossible for women to be at once worshiped in prayers and treated as inferiors in social relations. Instead, it could be argued, the very reason behind the enshrining of the female creative principle was the perception by women of the divine in their own image. Some of the extant literature which survived to a much later period seems to bear this theory out. For example, the Earth Goddess Demeter of the ancient Greeks is portrayed even in relatively late Homeric oral poetry as a maternal figure with a special relationship to women and children, yet with enormous powers over men as well. By contrast, the stern, autocratic, blood-lusting and supermasculine deity of the Old Testament is much more appropriate to a patriarchal society. The women this Jehovah curses as whores and heathens are perhaps the very matriarchal queens whose powers the invading masculinist forces needed to stamp out for their own purposes.

Whether or not the matriarchies existed and whether or not the question is even capable of proof, to raise the issue of the interconnection between female biology and religious and secular power is in itself of enormous importance. It seems to me that the power of the new feminist culture, the powers which were attributed to the ancient matriarchies (considered either as historical fact or as mythic archetypes) and the inner power with which many women are beginning to feel in touch and which is the soul of feminist art, may all arise from the same source. That source is none other than female biology: the capacity to bear and nurture children. It is conceivable that the intrinsic biological connection between mother and embryo or mother and infant gives rise to those psychological qualities which have always been linked with women, both in ancient lore and modern behavioral science. Motherhood must be understood here as a potential which is imprinted in the genes of every woman; as such it makes no difference to this analysis of femaleness whether a women ever has, or ever will, bear a child. Biology alone is in no way an adequate explanation of what it is to be female. Women have been exploited in our society for at least five thousand years and female powers have been correspondingly frustrated and weakened. The effect of powerlessness on us is nowhere more obvious than in contemporary motherhood. In the patriarchy, we do not rise to a position of special esteem and authority when we have children. On the contrary, we are denied even the few options for meaningful participation in society that are available to us as childless women. We react to this powerlessness in a myriad of negative ways, ranging from over-possessiveness of our children (as in the hypertense Jewish-mother-stereotype) to utter self-abnegation (as in the Madonna-image) to child-murder (as in the myth of Medea). But feminist culture is based on what is best

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Responses to Jane Albert by five Iowa City Dykes follow this article.

and strongest in women, and as we begin to define ourselves as women, the qualities coming to the fore are the same ones a mother projects in the best kind of nurturing relationship to a child: empathy, intuitiveness, adaptability, awareness of growth as a process rather than as goal-ended, inventiveness, protective feelings towards others and a capacity to respond emotionally as well as rationally. If matriarchy means a society in which these are the qualities all human beings admire and strive to embody, a society in which the paradigm for all social relationships is the relationship of a healthy and secure mother to her child, then matriarchy means nothing less than the end of oppression.

Interestingly enough, the materialist analysis brings us to conclusions similar to the ones I have just set forth from an idealist standpoint. In the Marxist dialectical-materialist view of history, the "vanguard" of the "revolutionary class" is that group which is not only greatly exploited by the class in power but which is also performing labor essential to the functioning of society. The ruling class is thereby forced to respond to demands which it puts forth in the name of the oppressed. A third requirement is that the class be potentially collective; each member should not be severely isolated from every other. In classical Marxism, the "revolutionary vanguard" is composed of the "industrial proletariat" who must sell their labor to the capitalists in order to eat, whose labor is essential to industry and therefore to society, and whose work process is socialized. No revolution founded on Marxist principles has adhered to the classic pattern: in Russia the proletariat was a tiny minority with no influence at the time of the Bolshevik revolution, and Mao had to rewrite both Marx and Lenin to suit Chinese conditions, defining the peasantry as the "vanguard" in that context. The industrial proletariat in the U.S. today are a larger group than in either prerevolutionary Russia or prerevolutionary China, but are not, by and large, an exploited one. Through unions they have acquired a significant share of power, and their right-wing views do not spring from "false class consciousness" but rather from a hard-nosed sense of their own self-interest. Taken alone, Third World male industrial workers are much less priveleged, and women in industry are the most exploited of all of these in respect to both wages and working conditions; but these very divisions of the "proletariat" show the obstacles to its solidarity more pointedly than anything else. However, if, with Firestone, we transfer our focus from economics to sex, that is, from production to reproduction, the Marxist terminology itself begins to make more sense. For there is very clearly a large group of women who by reason both of exploitation and importance to the society perfectly answer the requirements of the vanguard, and who are increasingly closely in touch with one another. These women are, of course, mothers.

Mothers live by their labor yet generally without standardized wages. If they have husbands who earn good money and are generous, they are amply supplied - but only as long as they can keep their husbands. Otherwise, they have little or nothing outside the neccessities and whatever they do have goes to their children first. The only mothers who do earn a standard wage for the labor of child-rearing are those on welfare, and that pay is barely enough to sustain life. The job is without guarantees of security of any kind. Its workday is twenty-four hours, workweek seven days, no vacations, no holidays. Total dedication to the job is expected, and yet a woman who works "only" in the home is regarded, with some contempt, as an unemployed housewife. Women with children are the women who most frequently suffer from fatigue, headaches, listlessness, depression, insomnia, digestive disorders, loss of energy, nervous tension and other illnesses common to women. If the women who work in factories were all replaced by men, it would represent some economic cost to industry but no alteration in the power structure or the basic assumptions of society concerning sex and class roles. The labor of these same women in the home, however - and of all women who work at child-rearing, whether of their own children, adopted children or someone else's children for wages - cannot be replaced on a mass scale without cataclysmic changes in the social structure.

Mothers are a distinctly defined group. Nevertheless, their interests as a group are in no way opposed to the interests of women as a whole, but are rather intimately linked with these. For motherhood itself is only the concrete expression of that potential which defines all women. Accordingly the domestic situation of women underlies the way we are treated on the job market. But the point of Mother Right is to reshape the family according to the perceptions of women, and to reshape the society in the image of this new matriarchal family. Because motherhood cuts across economic class, race and sexual preference, a society in which women were powerful by virtue of being mothers would not be divided along any of these lines. Nor would any new division between women, such as between mothers and childless women, arise, because the root of motherhood and the root of female consciousness are, I believe, the same.

Returning to my personal experience again, my self-interest in changing society is bound up with that of women who have children much more deeply than it is, for example, with women demanding equal pay for equal work, despite the fact that I am single, childless and must work to support myself. If I had to sum up in a few words what I feel to be my own oppression in this society, I would say, "The enormous economic, social and psychological obstacles against bearing and raising children of my own." While my situation as a fugitive seems to all but eliminate any hope that I might raise a child of my own, even these unusual circumstances are only slightly more handicapping than those any other woman faces when contemplating motherhood without marriage, or at least a stable relationship to a man. These obstacles and the tools to overcome them are beginning to be studied and developed by many different women, notably by Lesbians who have or want to have children. The oppression suffered by women whose sexual preference is for other women is peculiar to patriarchy, it seems to me, and would be eliminated as soon as women cease to be pawns in male power games. If Mother Right were the informing principle of society, it would make no difference whether a woman lived with men or women, let alone with whom she slept. A woman would be powerful and respected simply as a woman, and particularly esteemed as a mother, regardless of whom she lived with. For far from being in a position to exploit a woman because she chose to live and/or sleep with other women, a man would consider himself fortunate if a woman only chose to live and/or sleep with him.

The conditions of life in the patriarchy are such that the overwhelming majority of women in the foreseeable future will continue to marry and raise children and to regard that role as the central one in their lives. This majority includes millions of women who also have jobs outside their homes. The Women's Movement is their movement not only because they are a majority, but because feminist consciousness springs directly from the role they play in society. Many segments of the Women's Movement are now beginning to implicitly recognize this truth and act upon it. N.O.W. is making a major push to speak to the needs of housewives by agitating for an end to discrimination against married women by banks, insurance companies and credit unions. Radical feminists are demanding less that women leave men, and suggesting that it might be more effective in building a revolutionary base if women instead move to become heads of their families. Outside the consciously political segment of the Women's Movement, hosewives are beginning to unite and to agitate for their common interests, starting with lower food prices. More mothers are expressing their dissatisfactions and talking about their problems, while not necessarily seeing these as related to the Women's Movement; more women within the Movement are beginning to experience their feelings as mothers as feelings which are integral to their identities as women. Demands relating to jobs, professional opportunities and electoral representation will continue to be important, partly because the unequal treatment of women in these areas makes people aware of women's overall inferior status, and partly because increasing numbers of women want and need to support themselves with jobs outside the home. But the Women's Movement must, and will, begin to focus on those demands which relate concretely to women's role in child-rearing. These more radical-feminist demands include: wages for all women engaged in child-rearing; paid holidays and vacations; collective child-care centers controlled by mothers with the participation of all members of the community, including fathers, older children and childless adults; laboratories and research facilities to be turned over to feminist scientists so that research into contraception, fertility, pregnancy and birth can be conducted in women's interests; hospital and outpatient facilities related to women's health to be run and staffed by women; self-help clinics, financed by the government but under community control; artificial insemination, sterilization procedures, facilites for extra-uterine birth, and related technology to be made widely available. Technology is a powerful tool which will free us to bear and raise our children in our own way at our own time. It must be turned over to women now, in order to prevent its becoming an even more powerful weapon against us and indeed against all life.

It is the uprising of women which will presage the end of oppression, but this uprising must be based on more than opposition to oppression and the definition of Woman as Other. It must be an affirmation of the power of female consciousness, of the Mother. The changes which it will embody can perhaps be better imagined as primarily spiritual and religious, rather than economic and social, though they will include and embody the latter. Thus a more apt analogy than the Cuban or Chinese revolutions might be the Reformation or the Christian revolution, or perhaps the revolution made by the patriarchy itself when the ancient gynocracies were invaded. I use these analogies because in each of these cases the economic and political changes were enormous, but they followed rather than preceded sweeping changes in human consciousness. The ripples spread through the institutions from the masses of people, rather than the other way around.

These were not, and never will be, gentle ripples. The oppressor is equipped with the tools of mechanized violence as never before; we are only beginning to reclaim the ancient rage that will defeat his evil. Feminism is teaching us, again, the healing power of anger trained on the true enemies of ourselves and our children, and our anger will supply us the resources we will need against the Man's weapons. Yet, from another point of view, we may remind ourselves that the violence of this cataclysm is no more nor less than the outward sign of a struggle of the human spirit. It seems very significant to me that simultaneously with the contemporary rise of feminism, there is a great rise of interest in psychic and spiritual phenomena. Because the Women's Movement gets lumped with the left in many people's minds, it is mistakenly regarded as narrowly "political." Yet feminism concerns more than political power, essential as that is. It is closely tied to theories of awakening consciousness, of creation and rebirth and of the essential oneness of the universe - teachings which lie at the heart of all Goddess-worshiping religions.

We are on the threshold of what all the ancient wisdoms, many of them handed down from matriarchal times, teach is a new age of consciousness and simultaneously on what seems scientifically to be a threshold in the evolution of the species, as the genetic code is broken and life produced in the laboratory. Could it not be that just at the moment masculinity has brought us to the brink of nuclear destruction or ecological suicide, women are beginning to rise in response to the Mother's call to save Her planet and create instead the next stage of evolution? Can our revolution mean anything else than the reversion of social and economic control to Her representatives among Womankind, and the resumption of Her worship on the face of the Earth? Do we dare demand less?

Jane Alpert

TO JANE... in struggle

Dear Jane,

I was very glad to receive your communication. Glad also that you are well and to hear of your political conversion.

I was impressed by your analysis. It is new to me, but I could see it had been thoroughly thought out.

Later as I was thinking about it, I wondered what is the purpose of such an analysis, even though I have read them, written them, been excited by just this type of far-reaching analysis before. May be it was that it didn't touch me personally enough because I am a lesbian and we are prevented from even vicariously enjoying our mother-right.

That is the context in which I was thinking.

What good does it do to determine who the vanguard is? Does the act of determining them make them rise up? Do special communications have to be directed to them to raise their consciousness about being oppressed so that can happen? And once they know they are the vanguard, what do they do? Pick up weapons we do not know how to use because we are women? Or will it be more of a general strike? All women refusing to take care of children and bringing things to a halt this Lysistrata way.

There are other things I question. It seems to me that even though you don't identify with women struggling for equal pay for equal work that this is a more wide spread and gut level interest among women than mother-right. Especially among working class women where pay differential is more crucial.

I also would disagree that the interests of mothers are not opposed to women as a whole. For instance, Lesbians. You can say lesbians are researching ways of being able to raise children and I know this to be true, but for the majority of gay women raising children is not a possibility. It is very complex. (see "Dialog between Old Gays", AIAW vol.3 numbers 2&3) First of all, gay people relating to children is an arch societal taboo. Secondly, gay women have had to arm themselves with alot of defenses against having or wanting to have children because that is one of the heavy things you have to deal with when you think you are gay. Thirdly, because gay women are not connected to male wealth, they must work to support themselves, making raising children economically impossible in many cases. Fourthly, there probably isn't a lesbian alive who hasn't been or isn't being oppressed by straight women and straight children. So you can see how lesbians can think that children are the domain of heterosexuality. And as for daycare for these straight women, let the women who have benefited by allegiance with males do the work. We, if we take care of children, will do it for other lesbians.

Yes, I agree women in the movement are beginning to experience their feelings as mothers, but I don't know that this is anymore integral to our identities as women than women becoming in tune with their feelings of love and sexuality for other women. Certainly you would agree that the these feelings must have been a part of the culture of the gynachracies and Amazon nations of long ago. What Elizabeth Gould Davis is describing in the First Sex, reminds me of the culture Sapho nurtured on the island of Lesbos.

I'm not saying that I have the right analysis and yours is wrong. But I've learned in dealing with analysis and direction that if you don't have the answers, questions are the next best thing. The inability to tolerate different perspectives from different oppressed groups of people is a problem the women's movement has. Different groups of women can work to form their own interest but they must consider and deal with the oppressions of the other groups ie., class, race, gayness, motherhood, age etc,. Maybe this is why I don't tend to think in terms of vanguards. Probably different groups have different conceptions of who the vanguard is. If I thought in these terms I would name lesbians as the vanguard.

I can imagine where you are in your head because I was there. The excitement of realizing the dynamic of feminism as a basis for social revolution. But I find it ironic that I am maybe closer to where you were originally (politically) and you are now closer to where I was. I don't know. I think it would be a shame if you let the talents you learned in Weatherman slide before you taught them to other women.

Love and respect,

Carrie of AIAW

Dear Jane,

We come from very different places, I am sure. I have always felt a love and concern for you as I do for anyone who has fought this society in some way, who has gone underground, been caused pain and turmoil because of their opposition. And I am happy at your change -your finding of feminism- I admire you having gotten there in what must have been isolation. But I want to respond to your theory honestly and that will have to mean negatively. I feel as if I have written a million articles, letters, etc. like this, always trying to preface with a love that is there my disagreements and anger--wanting whoever I am writing to to know and understand what my criticism means-that it is not malicious- that it is an attempt at communication. Normally the preface gets lost ..somewhere. Maybe it is just the smile that the evil shine on their victims. I'm crazy enough to know that I am capable of insanity and error but the conscious part of me speaks of intent that is loving-- a desire to not be ripped off and hurt, to not have you ripped off and hurt, to not have any women ripped off and hurt.

With every mention of mother right in your article, my body tenses and strains to hold in all the hysterical anger and repulsion that terms evokes in me. I hate the term, Jane, and everything it means to me is worse than Mark Rudd or Sam Melville. You claim this mother right as a basis of some kind of liberating direction for all women but I know in my gut I am left out of that. Before I knew I was gay I knew I didn't want to reproduce myself -- the thought repulsed me more than any fears my childhood saw. My ability to reproduce means nothing to me and I don't want my ability to mean anything to anyone else either.

Within this society and the reality we all live, certain situations are going to mean certain kinds of oppression for women. Relating to and living with men is going to be oppressive, having children is going to be oppressive and so are a lot of other things. But, the two things I mentioned we have more control over (we can choose not to do) unlike other things (jobs for instance) that we don't have much choice over. A gay mother wrote in an article for our last issue on childcare that she thought there was a choice involved in having a child but that that choice did not justify her oppression. I agree with that. I don't think women who relate to men or women who have children deserve what they get. What I am trying to say is they do get what they could have intelligently expected and gawd damn we know we have so much to do to arrive anywhere close to freedom. I wish we would stop wasting our time choosing a situation which will according to our own anaylsis oppress us. Buy a gun everytime you experience your mother instinct whatever the hell that is and I don't know what the hell it is. I have never felt it. Where do I fit into your future society? As a mother's helper? Fuck that.

I am aware that you have been influenced by The First Sex. It seems to be the rage. I haven't read it but have been real unhappy with what people have been thinking and talking about having been influenced by that book. I am in no way interested in recreating the past. I don't understand why anybody is. I am also not interested in being biologically superior to anyone. That is a distastful line of thought.

The feelings I'm expressing are very personal and involve what I want my role in any society to be. But I haven't spoken to the point that many women like yourself want to have children. That is a right I think any woman should have if she wants it. How that would be accomplished without the now present accompaning oppression in some post-revolutionary society can only be speculative. But the present is real and upholding a woman's right to childbirth means a lot to childless women. It means that childless women must help a lot to avoid a mother being oppressed because she is a mother. It is free labor and because a mother still has property rights over her child (and I should add that with the recent adulation of mother right it is sanctioned) the labor put in by childless women for mothers is exploited

What the issue of childcare has done to all of us is push us to attempt to achieve some post-revolutionary state without having made any material changes in society--to set personal behavior codes that are un-reachable. The attempts frustrate all of us and stagnate us. Attempting the impossible I do not find admirable. I think it kills and destroys human potential. And I want to repeat again that even though I do see the oppression of mothers and see its unjustness, the property right that mothers (especially recently, movement mothers) understandably cling to is exploitative to childless women. Especially exploitative to those childless women who mothers confront and guilt trip into doing childcare. I do believe that mothers' demands on childless women are justified when you consider the oppression that mothers suffer and the help they need but the subject of property rights were never fully considered and many mothers insisted on wanting to deny such rights only later under the influence of the glory of mother right to take up their right again and hurt many childless women who developed attachments to their children by taking the children away.

We tried to deal with motherhood and childcare. We had a daycare center where childless gay women worked and other non-institutional childcare arrangments were made. They weren't perfect and people made mistakes, arguments between mothers and non-mothers, straight and gay women were heated but I think people were trying. In the end we discovered what we knew from the beginning: gay women are not allowed to do childcare in this society and mothers have all the power regarding their own children. The result of all of this remains to be seen. The center closed because of county and state investigations and threat of custody suits, mothers are still over-burdened and do not trust childless women and childless women feel used.

So I do worry about your whole theory primarily because of my identity and the experiences I have had. I hope this is understandable.

P.S. I should try and make it clear that when I speak of property rights and power -- in fact everything I spoke to, I am speaking within the context of a women's community and so refer to the relationships that exist within that community. I am well aware that mothers, although having more power in regard to their own children than childless women, most often have less power than men and always less than the state.

Betsy IV of AIAW

...more letters to Jane...

dear jane,

I don't know how exactly to respond to your theory of mother right as the basis for feminist revolution. I find it to be something I very much disagree with and with increasing intensity each time I read your letter, but it is hard for me to sort out where that feeling is coming from--whether it comes from personally being fucked over by mother right or from real revulsion at the idea of motherhood being so glorified. Probably, it comes from both.

I think what hits me most about your article is its inherent heterosexuality and of the picture it paints of a post-feminist revolutionary society which gives little or no indication of not being the same entrenched heterosexual world. I think at the basis of your theory of mother right is the assumption that women are heterosexual beings. Obviously, motherhood, at least for now (and you give little indication and/or support of development of artificial reproduction techniques that can free women from their biology) implies that at some point in time in a women's life she was fucking with a man. By saying that the basis of a women's powers and the source of feminist revolution is the capacity for motherhood, you are inextricably linking women to men in this society, in any revolutionary struggle, and in the future society of matriarchy that you envision. I think such a theory comes out of your belief "that one can be a serious feminist and still live with and relate to a man and to men", a notion which I reject as totally contradictory and which I hope you will come some day to reject too. I am linking your notion of mother right so strongly with heterosexuality because you talk of motherhood in a future matriarchial society as coming from where it has come from now and in the past--through fucking with men. The change in reproduction methods brought on by technology that you only vaguely refer to, means, at least to me, the possibility of an essentially motherless and fatherless society; that men and women would play an equal role, or perhaps even no role, in the creation of a human being and that society would collectively be responsible for the embryonic development and upon birth, the nuturing and raising of the child.

Another sort of major disagreement I have with your letter is that the whole idea of motherhood and the values of motherhood as you see them--protectiveness, intuitiveness, adaptability--sort of makes my stomach turn. I do not feel and cannot relate to my oppression as a woman in this society as being one of an inability to raise children. Rather, I feel my oppression at least partially as being because of that ability and my attempts to reject the glorification of motherhood that is foisted on me everywhere and now even with the women's movement. Where does your idea of motherhood as the moving force of the revolution leave women, particularly lesbians, who cannot fit into the role of mother--who both emotionally and intellectually abhor the thought of bearing and raising children? Where is our place in this new society?

I want to say something too about the importance of women's history. The knowledge of the position of women in ancient matriarchial cultures I find very exciting because it gives me a sense of a history of women as being strong and powerful and controlling--how I envision women in a future society. I think this knowledge is very important in building a women's movement because it gives women a sense of where we have come from. What scares me about books like The First Sex is the reaction to it--that feminists are turning to the concept of matriarchy as being the new vision or goal of feminist revolution. I think it is a mistake and even reactionary to transform the basis of ancient women controlled societies to that of post revolutionary society of the twentieth or 21st century or whenever and to see the same source of power in ancient cultures as being the source of women's power today. It scares me because it is coming dangerously close to accepting values which have been the source of women's oppression for thousands of years and at a time in which we are on the very brink of being able to do away with that very fact which has oppressed women for so many years--our ability to bear children. It is that which you idealize and which I reject. I want to live in a society in which women are totally free to determine their lives. I don't want a society in which I am a mother, in actuality or not, first.

These are some of my thoughts on your article, Jane. I hope they are of some help to you in thinking out your ideas. Take care of yourself.

In sisterhood and struggle, B.

* *

MS FIRE

When the rage spreads above my eyelids
in that debilitating form
for awhile I don't recognize that
weeping is the last turn inward for my heat.
I forget that it has crept by then
from my community to myself
without burning even the fingers
of those who are the cause of it.

It isn't the tears so much I mind,
but the fact that not long ago
when anger against the women
with whom I work and sleep
was hotter than anger against the cop-callers,
queer-baiters and fuckers of every description,
I flared at the careless word of a friend.

In a cold spring night I fummed,
Learning finally that if I loosen the teeth of a malicious woman
or if I choke, until her eyes pop,
the neck of a slippery-mouthed woman,
I hurt them for our mutual enemies;
learning that if I smoulder into a night that burns back
because of a woman I love,
the cop-callers, queer-baiters and fuckers of every description
gather in soft victories.

And so this spring, almost this very day
I kicked the first fucker who passed on that street
and before I was finished
I knew what I needed to know.

April 1973
Iowa City

The fat lesbian bitches
ugly lesbian whores
filthy bull dykes
who fight to clear a living space
that all women will occupy
are freeing us
from the touches and pokes,
the small indignities
we suffered as girls.

Young women will no longer sulk
when little boys pull their hair
or smile when bigger boys
pinch their asses.
They will not make the mistake
of thinking nuisances will go away
if they are ignored.

On your own street
if you do not know
on whose head to bring down
a tire iron,
if you do not, if you cannot
stand with the fat ugly filthy
whores and lesbians
who are drawing overdue blood
then defend them
against the mind bending that
tries to discredit them
for taking offense where
offense was intended.

When even small lines are drawn
give praise to women
who are clearing ground
on which we will all live.

June 1972
Iowa City

Dear Jane Alpert,

One of the claims that your letter makes is that mother right cuts across many important lines, including sex preference. Obviously there are lesbians who have children, some who want to have children, some who long for them if only the world wasn't the way it is, and some who do not now and never have wanted children. I am a woman from the last group, and I want to try to tell you why your analysis is offensive to me and why I think it is incorrect in general.

The religious fervor of mother right as described in your letter sounds no different to me than the ruling class propaganda about the myth of motherhood. It takes the ideology which grows out of "biology is destiny" and attempts to glorify it into "biology is power". That is my first gripe. It has a familiar ring--all women want to be mothers, or should be mothers, or failing to respond to all hints, are at least capable of being mothers. You could as well and as truly argue that all women are potentially lesbians. Maternal function and sex preference are both descriptions that limit possibilities for women, especially when you are talking about a post-revolutionary vision. At present your analysis neglects to mention the enormous complications that mother right presents regarding institutionalized heterosexuality, men and male children.

It is idealistic to talk about methods of impregnation without men before women have seized power. I am stunned by your statement that "Radical feminists are demanding less that women leave men, and suggesting that it might be more effective in building a revolutionary base if women instead move to become the heads of their families." (p. 22) Further, the demands that you enumerate, about wages, vacations, holidays, research facilities, hospitals and clinics "financed by the government" no less, are idle dreams. In this country white ruling class males are not going to give us anything we ask for or turn over to us anything we demand. Because we will have to take by force the space to build our world, it is cruel and impractical to encourage white middle class females--who I believe are most susceptible to mother right, especially the way you argue for it (religion, anthropology, scholarship, science)--to bear children. Since mothers as a class, because of their proximity to men and their vested interest in their male children, will not be the ones to take by force the necessary space, it strikes me as unlikely that the mother-child relationship will serve as a useful model in a post-revolutionary society.

Inspite of your attempt to apply a materialist buttress the article unsettles me by its individualistic approach that often tends to be insensitive or indifferent to class differences. (pp12-13 for starters). I also feel that what you say about the "few options for meaningful participation" available to childless women that aren't available to mothers points up a big gap in our experiences. First it is clear you are not talking about lower class women with or without children. Second women without men and without children are outside of "meaningful participation". Women who make it in this pig pen generally do so after they pay their dues as wives and mothers. This apparent difference in our experiences is also the reason I am completely baffled by your statement about what you feel to be your own oppression in this society. Bearing and raising children is like being a Black who worked in the master's house--no picnic to be sure (though even there you are talking about the pressures that keep you from choosing that), while some of us have been in the field all our lives.

It seems to me a little off handed to say that "If Mother Right were the informing principle of society..." sexual preferences wouldn't matter because "A woman would be powerful and respected simply as a woman, and particularly esteemed as a mother." (p. 21) So all a person like me would have to do in order to have full access to all channels of power (I assume some power is connected to being "esteemed") is to voluntarily, after seeing its obvious advantages, become a mother. Thanks anyhow, but I'll stay in the field. What you're telling me is exactly what Big Daddy told me; Big Mommie's version is just as oppressive and it does not take into account what must be done.

I have a kind of nightmare of the ruling class holding their breath to see if feminists are now going to voluntarily take themselves out of the public hair by opting into an exploitive dynamic that will return to them just enough crumbs of privelege, especially if they have sons, that they will not know how to fight after their fifteen or twenty years of service to the status quo. The way I see it Mother Right analysis attempts to reform Motherhood ideology without dealing with the structures that oppress women without children, except to umbrella them as potential mothers, and without dealing with the structures that make the oppression of women with children necessary in a capitalistic society.

in

Sisterhood

Dear Jane,

There are many things in your article that disturb me and make me angry. As I read it, I question these areas of your thought: your concept of revolution, your concept of children, and your concept of womanhood.

To start with the last one first, it is probably obvious that I would have to disagree with you about your projected concept of womanhood because you evidently are still straight and I am a Dyke. There are subterranean hints in your article that indicate a sympathy toward Lesbians, and maybe you are moving toward that place yourself, just as you moved from old left heterosexuality to radical feminist (heterosexuality? celebacy? I don't want to guess or try to define you without more words from you). The most glaring example of our differences arises out of your definition of feminist culture's base: "...feminist culture is based on what is best and strongest in women, and as we begin to define ourselves as women, the qualities coming to the fore are the same ones a mother projects in the best kind of nurturing relationship to a child." I would agree with the "based on what is best and strongest in women" part, but as for the rest I strongly take exception. To use as a prototype a mother/child relationship, even the best kind as you describe it, is miles from my experience of valuable realtionships with women. As I see it, the only working definition of "best kind" that we can come up with in this society (including counter-culture living arrangements of all kinds) is still distant, powerful, one-sided and oblivious to the deep struggle/love mutuality that can exist between women. Because you rely on the mother/child relationship as basic you have to take into account the necessary age difference that also exists, and I think it is safe to say that we haven't been able to even begin to bridge the age differences and chauvinism that exist in social relationships today. If you mean some kind of post-revoltuionary vision of a mother/child relationship, I still think you are misguided because I seriously question whether post-revoltuionary conditions will even embody a mother/child relationship as we think of it now. Later in that same paragraph you say: "the paradigm for all social relationships (will be) the relationship of a healthy and secure mother to her child." I contend that "healthy and secure" in your statement can only mean some kind of psychological prescription that is already part of the idealistic status quo. (In fact, it sounds a lot like Freud.)

That last quote also brings me to my second point about our differences. What is your concept of children? As reflected in your article (and you don't discuss it, so I can only infer from your usage of words and discussion of motherhood and Mother Right), I would say that you assume something of a children-as-property attitude toward young people. You use the phrase "a healthy and secure mother to her child" in the paragraph I mentioned above. To me this whole idea is one we have to work against, as we do the concept of the nuclear family, even with the mother as the only nucleus. I don't believe biological mothers should be the pivot point for their biological child's upbringing, and to predicate a theory for revolutionary change on that notion is, I think, a dangerous one. You also say that in your analysis, the source of your personal oppression (do you generalize this?) is: "the enormous economic, social and psychological obstacles against bearing and raising children of (your) own." Here again, the mother is defined as having power and control over the biological child. I know it is shit to have kids in this society, for all the reasons that were pointed out to you by the women you met while travelling around the country. But you are not having kids because you have the power to decide not to put up with that shit, and for that you should only be thankful. If you aren't, then I agree with another writer that you are a victim of the glorification of motherhood myth.

Finally, I question the concept of revolution as suggested in your letter. First, it is only suggested, and aside from a couple of references to violent struggle your strategy seems to lie in basically reformist tactics -- change (by demand) the center of the nuclear family, magically take over scientific research and practice, etc. The system will kill us before anything happens if we rely on that route. Your analogy at the end of your article to the Reformation, rather than the Chinese or Cuban revolutions, as being the process we should think of is again, I think, wrongheaded. (I don't know what you mean by the Christian revolution, and I'm not arguing that the Chinese or Cuban revolutions can give us a pattern either because they were male-dominated.) But you say that the change in consciousness predated the changes in economic and social organization, and will in our struggle too. I can only conjecture about the changes in consciousness that men went through before they smashed the gynocracies that probably existed in prehistory, but I doubt that they came first. As they got more power, they became more piggy, and on and on until the whole shit pile that exists today evolved. But I don't need conjecture to contradict you; both you and I are good examples of the ways our material conditions changed our consciousnesses. It wasn't until you began living in a culture that contained ideas about women's liberation and radical feminism that you were able to deny and contradict the lip service that you were paying to the male left even when you knew it was a sham, as you describe in the account you gave of your distrust of Sam Melville that you submerged when you wrote the introduction to the edition of his prison letters. My example is that I have been having gay relationships since I was 19, ten years ago, but I lived heterosexually in society, even got married, while I was having that constant gay experience, because everything around me reinforced the heterosexual society and the only lesbian I knew was my lover. It wasn't until I met a lot of other Dykes and saw that the life-style I was submerging was correct and good that I had the strength to quit the heterosexual world. And I don't think the rest of society is all that different from you and me in that sense...except that they may realize a whole lot quicker than us because of our various priveleges that stand or stood in the way of our perception of our self-interest.

Love in the struggle,
Martha, from the AIAW collective

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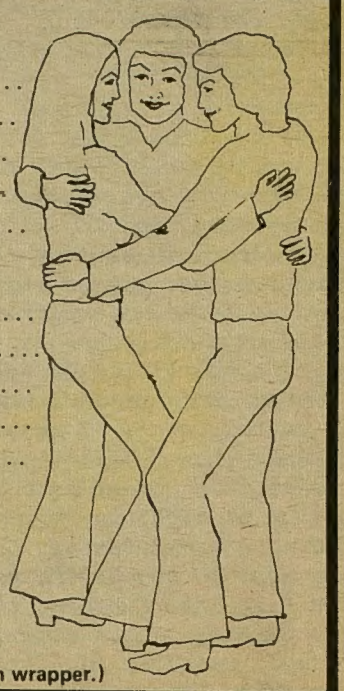

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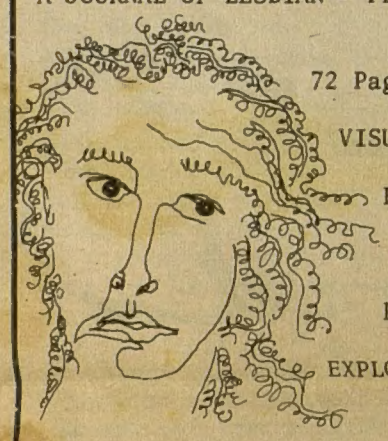

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